



Michael Joseph Stengel, C.P.

Birth: May 11, 1929

Profession: July 9, 1950

Ordination: May 25, 1957

Death: May 27, 2010



C Archuleta (front left), MJ Stengel, G Steckel, G Osterbert (back), P Berendt, A Chadler and N Vaughin at Vestition, St. Paul, Kansas, July 5, 1949.



MJ Stengel, H Whitechurch, P Berendt, R Rogalski, G Steckel, L Doherty at ordination 1957.



Michael was Provincial for two terms, 1991-1999.

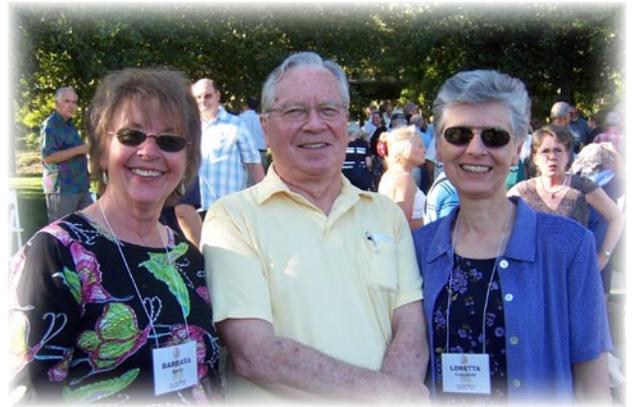


P Berendt (left), MJ Stengel, R Roglaski and L Doherty pose for a class reunion picture.





MJ Stengel, N Parsons and W Kaelin, former Provincials.



B Ayers, MJ Stengel and L Ciesielski.



MJ Stengel with Pope John Paul II.



John (brother) and wife Edna before closing of coffin.



Funeral Mass was at St. Agnes, Louisville, KY.



D Webber lead the Eucharist with Archbishop T Kelly attending for the Archdiocese.



Rose was left on top of coffin to symbolize MJ Stengel's love for roses and gardening.

Funeral Homily
St. Agnes Church - June 1, 2010
for
Michael Joseph Stengel, CP

I have called you by name; you are mine.
Isaiah 43:1-6a - II Corinthians 4:6-12 - Luke 10:21-24
Joseph Mitchell, C.P.

Yesterday, our nation commemorated Memorial Day, an annual holiday when we remember of those who died while serving our country.

We need memorials. We need reminders. Shared memories make our life in common possible. If we are going to forge any sort of coherent society, form any kind of meaningful community, or have any sense of family, we must have the ability to remember. In fact, our whole life in common is shaped by memories - remembering our heritage and founding, remembering of our shared joys and sorrows, remembering significant events such as birthdays, anniversaries and deaths. These collective memories give us a distinctive idea of who we are. Without them we would lose a sense of identity and belonging.

Over the past nine years, little by little we lost Michael as part of our family and as part of our community as the fog of Alzheimer's took away his ability to remember. At various times he could not remember where he was or what he intended to do. Eventually he forgot names and he forgot events. Alzheimer's destroyed his mind and stole his memory - so we slowly lost him.

Part of the experience of being with someone we love as they are fading away and gradually dying is a shifting and sorting process - allowing us to remember them in a way we could not do in their lifetime. One by one, we let go of the things that are gone - and we mourn the loss of them. One by one, we take hold of the things that are most valued, that have become part of us - and build our memories of that person again.

After all, a person is not just what they remember; but what others remember about them. So I want to share with you the way I have come to remember Michael Joseph and the way he carried in his life the dying and rising of Christ. It is certainly not the only Michael Joseph; for there are as many Michael Josephs as there are people who knew him. And it is probably not the most accurate Michael Joseph; for I admit I am biased with admiration. But it is a remembrance of Michael Joseph that comes from my experience of knowing him for 46 years and from recollections many of you have shared. It is also an inside look that comes from a sense he had of self expressed in an autobiography he wrote ten years ago while on sabbatical ? and from the three Scripture readings which he purposely selected and wanted us to hear on this occasion.

He was known by different names. Some of us remember him Bill; some remember him "Unc" (uncle). The staff at Golden Living always called him "Father." Once upon a time he was known as "Fr. Provincial." In Chicago, some called him "MJ." But all of us know him by the name he chose for himself in novitiate, Michael Joseph.

In many religious traditions, a person's name has special significance. So it is, I believe, with Michael Joseph Stengel. The three words he used for his name are much more than a label. They reveal his inner essence and highlight what was most notable about him. They also speak to us of his core identity. Michael knew, as God said through the prophet Isaiah in the first reading: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."

I. First and always, his name was Stengel.

Michael Joseph was firmly and inextricably rooted in the Stengel family of Louisville, Kentucky. In the beginning, he was given with the name William LeMarr Stengel. Eventually, he dropped the William LeMarr, but he never gave up the Stengel.

He always thought that being a Stengel and being a Kentuckian was a blessing. He had a close-knit and loving family - his parents, Rudy and Lucy, and his brother John. He begins his autobiography with characteristic enthusiasm: "Sharing in the energy of the first flaring forth, I burst into the 15 billion year old energetic evolution of the Universe kicking and screaming on May 11, 1929.... This stellar cosmological event took place in the very center of the universe, the rich soil of a place: 1614 Shady Lane, Louisville, Kentucky, USA.... I know what I first recognized and remember. I know my parents loved me. I am in no way aware of never being loved."

Though he moved away at age 14, when he left for the Passionist seminary, he was deeply devoted to his family and grateful for the home they created for him. John, Edna, Susan, Michael, Bob, Patrice - he was fond of you and cherished you deeply. In his autobiography, he writes: "My blood family has been a source of real joy and happiness of me. That wonderful relationship with my brother I first remember in my early consciousness now expanded to my brother's wife and children... Their home has always been home for me."

As Ralph mentioned last night, he was the one who initiated the cousin's party, bringing many of you together on a regular basis.

Despite living in Passionist residences throughout the country - Des Moines, Detroit, Chicago, Cincinnati, Sacramento - he always had a sense that his true place was Kentucky. When you asked him what he wanted to drink. There was no surprise. He slung his arm over his head and asked for Kentucky bourbon in the form of a Manhattan.

It was here, at St. Agnes Church, where his journey began 81 years ago. Here he was baptized. Except for two years (when he went to Sacred Heart model school), he attended elementary school at St. Agnes. In the sacristy, he first expressed his Passionist vocation to Fr. Bernard Mary Coffey. In this sanctuary he celebrated his first Mass as a priest 53 years ago (last Wednesday, the day before he died).

But even before all of that, he received in this church his first grace. Before taking him home from St. Anthony's hospital (where he was born on the third floor), his parents deliberately drove past their house on Shady Lane, and brought him into this church. Standing in front on the altar to St. Joseph's, they dedicated him to God. He has been true to that grace, his family and this place ever since.

II. His second name was Joseph.

Like St. Joseph, husband of Mary and father of Jesus, our Michael Joseph was a protector and father of our Passionist community.

Like St. Joseph, he was a good and faithful man. Some people try to look good; others try to act good; but Michael was genuinely good. It seemed to flow so naturally. When we lived together in Sacramento, I was a young priest. I would marvel (and sometimes envy) the spontaneity of his goodness. Once I asked him: "How did you become good?" He did not know. He could not pinpoint a time when it emerged. When I asked: "How can I become good?" Without blushing and without conceit, he suggested: "Be your self - be free." Michael Joseph had a deep sense of inner freedom because he was connected to something beyond his ego - to what Thomas Merton called the true self.

Like St. Joseph, our Michael Joseph was a man of enormous integrity. He was unselfconsciously himself. It seemed that he had no “secrets” that he was afraid or ashamed to share. He lived without pretense and without duplicity. After he died on Wednesday, while we were waiting for the funeral home to pick up the body, we took a single red rose from the vase on his bedside table and placed it on his chest. His niece Patrice summed it up when she said: “That’s who he was - a long stemmed red rose.” He was beautiful in his simplicity and fragrant in his genuineness.

Like St. Joseph, our Michael Joseph manifested fearlessness and holy hope. He met challenges with dignity and grace. Paul describes this in second reading - and I think that is why Michael wanted us to read it at his funeral. When he was afflicted, he was not constrained. When he was perplexed, I never saw him driven to despair. When he was persecuted, I never sensed he ever felt abandoned. Even in the end, when he was diminished and struck down by Alzheimer’s, it never appeared that he was truly destroyed by it.

Michael was young at heart. He resonated with the Gospel prayer of Jesus: “I give you praise, Father, for although you have hidden things from the wise and clever, you have revealed them to the childlike.” So many people have commented on his wonderful sense of humor. A number of years ago, we were preparing for a provincial chapter and it seemed likely that he would be elected to provincial leadership. That meant he would have to move from sunny California to shivering Chicago. One evening on the back porch of our house in Sacramento, with Manhattan in hand, he began concocting ways to discredit himself for the job. Finally, he landed on a strategy. He suggested that we begin spreading rumors that he secretly dances for the gay ballet in San Francisco. Then he laughed. Can you imagine him doing pirouettes in leotards?

Like St. Joseph, our Michael Joseph was a spiritual father to our Passionist community. As vice-master of novices, as director of senior students at the seminary in Warrenton, and as master of novices, he introduced many of us to religious life. He taught me and so many others how to pray using the scriptures - how to meditate.

Though he never sought leadership, yet he served with distinctive competence as our provincial for eight years. He was protective and he was wise in his fatherly care of the province. In his autobiography he writes: “I can honestly say I enjoyed being provincial. I floundered in the job - until I read the article by George Wilson on leadership. His ideas I embraced totally and from then on I was my own man in the job. Basically, (a provincial is) set aside by the province to lead by inspiration and creative ideas, not just administer. I experienced great peace and strength during these years. There is such a thing as the grace of office.” As a province, we were graced by his leadership.

More significant than the offices he held, Michael Joseph was a community man in the richest sense of the word. Mike Higgins, who served on Michael Joseph’s council and followed him as provincial, said, “He loved the community. He cared for the brethren.” He cherished his Passionist brothers with unflinching respect and affection. Who can forget the extraordinary care he gave to Jim DeManuele during the recent years when he was sick and dying. Many of us felt we could confide in him the most vulnerable and confidential parts of ourselves. He listened with sympathy and respect. He always proved trustworthy. In fact, in the past few years he thought he was becoming an even better confessor and spiritual director. At the wake last night, a priest from the archdiocese who had been coming to Michael for spiritual direction and confession until a few years ago said that Michael told him: “I’m a better confessor now. Whatever you tell me I’ll forget.”

III. Finally and most significantly, his name was Michael.

St. Michael, his namesake, is not really a saint or even a mere angel - but he is an archangel! Despite my great admiration, I am not going to claim that our Michael was an absolute angel. Of course, he had his own

insecurities, inner demons, and shortcoming. But, like the angelic Michael, our Michael was strikingly a man of God. In fact, the name Michael contains the Hebrew word for God, "El" - and means "he who is like God."

Like St. Michael, our Michael was a deeply spiritual person. Those who were fortunate enough to know him never failed to realize that his was, above all, a life lived in God. He knew deeply in the fiber of his being that God's Spirit was a treasure within his earthen vessel.

Tradition has it that angels are set apart to be messengers of God, servants of God, known for their holiness and devotion to God. They have privileged access to the Divine. The Gospel passage which Michael selected indicates he sensed he had equal access. And so we can say of him what Jesus said to his disciples: "Blessed are the eyes that saw what you saw. For I tell you, Michael, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it; and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

I think many of us can admit that we are immeasurably more for having known Michael Joseph - and fell immensely less in losing him. Just as we know more about God because we have seen Jesus, I feel that I know more about Jesus because I knew Michael Joseph.

Now, like St. Joseph, he disappears quietly and humbly into history. Like the angel Michael, he continues to be a spiritual beacon. Like Jesus, he shows us that dying to self is the way to fullness of life - on this side of the grace. The final paragraph of his autobiography gives testimony to this. I will let Michael have the last word by sharing what he wrote in January 2000.

"As I begin the 21st century, two Scripture passages sum up where I am. One is from Romans 4:16 "everything is grace (gift)." The other is from II Peter 3:8: "This point must not be overlooked ... in the Lord's eyes, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are as a day." At this stage of my life, I felt that everything has been "gift." I know I have been gifted, not as much as some, more than other - but that does not matter. All is gift! I also experience a sense of timelessness. All of a sudden while in time, I am outside of time. I sense a certain unity that is beyond time and space. All is one. I can't explain it. It just is. The mess that the church is in is nothing; the mess that the world, the cosmos is in is nothing. The mess that I am in personally is nothing. All is gift, all is one. I am caught up in a fire and brilliant light that consumes all problems, heals all wounds, solves all mysteries, the cosmic Christ who is before all, in all, beyond all, Jesus. Experientially, this brings me peace and joy and security. I am worry free. It produces in me a sense to move on, beyond, to go on yet another mission. I do not see what it is. I sense something. It may fructify, it may not. I await the new dawn. I do not know what the future holds. I do know that whatever it is will be gift and outside of time ? God, timeless and glorious. Come, Lord Jesus!"